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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000014

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y / / / P A R A S T W O A N D F O U R / / /

DEPT FOR NEA AND PRM

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TAGS: PREL PREF KPAL KWBG IS JO

SUBJECT: PLO REFUGEE AFFAIRS OFFICIAL QUIETLY TRYING TO
LAY GROUNDWORK FOR COMPROMISE ON RIGHT OF RETURN

REF: A) JERUSALEM 3982

B) JERUSALEM 3541

CLASSIFIED BY DCM GREG BERRY PER 1.5 (b) AND (D).

¶11. (C) Summary: Jordan-based PLO Refugee Affairs official Mohamed Abu Bakr told refcoord December 24 that he and West Bank Refugee Affairs Director Saji Salameh are quietly trying to prepare the Palestinian refugee community for what they see as an inevitable compromise on the right of return. Working in secret -- and without the knowledge of either Abu Mazen or de facto PLO Refugee Affairs Department head Marwan Abdelhamid -- Abu Bakr and Salameh are seeking funding from the Canadian and Norwegian governments for public opinion surveys and a broad public relations campaign that would convince Palestinians of the need to think pragmatically about right of return. Abu Bakr said they will not raise the proposal with PLO or PA leadership until they have received Canadian and Norwegian reaction to their proposal. End summary.

¶12. (C) In a December 24 meeting with refcoord, Jordan-based PLO Department of Refugee Affairs Director (for Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon) Mohamed Abu Bakr dismissed as "nonsense" the notion that "five million Palestinians will return to a country of five million Israelis." Abu Bakr told refcoord that Palestinians need to think pragmatically about the right of return and start preparing public opinion now for an eventual, inevitable compromise. In order to do so, Abu Bakr said, the PLO must conduct studies and surveys of the entire Palestinian population, including those not typically included in the diaspora such as the 45,000 1948 refugees believed to be resident in Iraq. Abu Bakr believes that any settlement made without a comprehensive survey will not last, as the absence of a unified Palestinian position would provide a pretext for rejectionists to disavow and destroy the settlement.

¶13. (C) In order to prepare the groundwork for what they see as an inevitable compromise, Abu Bakr said that he and PLO Refugee Affairs West Bank Director Saji Salameh are seeking funding from the Canadian and Norwegian governments to conduct studies and surveys, followed by a wide-scale public relations campaign to convince Palestinians of the need to compromise on the right of return. Abu Bakr cautioned that neither Abu Mazen nor de facto head of the Department of Palestinian Affairs Marwan Abdelhamid are aware of this plan; neither he nor Salameh wanted to raise the proposal until they had received an initial reaction and hopefully a promise of funding from the Canadians and the Norwegians. Salameh was to have meet with the Canadians on the margins of a late November Geneva forum on compensation, but was unable to travel due to health problems. Abu Bakr promised to brief refcoord as soon as he had reaction from the Canadians and Norwegians.

¶14. (C) When queried about the timing of his proposal -- and specifically why Abu Bakr believes Palestinians might be receptive to the idea of compromise when the situation on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza had deteriorated so dramatically over the last two years -- Abu Bakr said the Palestinians have "no choice" but to compromise. (Note: PLO Refugee Affairs West Bank Director Salameh appears to have reversed his early position that the timing wasn't right for a public debate on the issue -- see ref b.) Although political realities dictate that PLO and PA officials must use "different language" when discussing the right of return in public, Abu Bakr said that more pragmatic statements, such as those made by Sari Nusseibeh, reflect the reality of the PA's position. While little appears to be moving on a political level between the Israelis and the Palestinians, Abu Bakr believes that the Palestinians cannot afford to waste time by not pushing forward on their own internal political issues. Should the Israelis decided to negotiate, Abu Bakr said, political progress could come very quickly and the Palestinian public needs to be convinced of the importance of compromise. To this end, Abu Bakr and Salameh have decided to change the focus of the Department of Refugee Affairs, away from

humanitarian assistance projects and toward broader political mobilization such as their proposed survey and PR campaign.

15. (C) Comment: Given the vehemence with which the PLO publicly denounced Sari Nusseibeh's October 2002 proposal for compromise on the right of return (ref a), it is unlikely that the PLO leadership will publicly embrace Abu Bakr and Salameh's proposal. Yet their proposal reflects a core truth essential to any long-term settlement: that the C O R R E C T E D C O P Y//PARAS TWO AND FOUR// Palestinian public -- both within the West Bank and Gaza and elsewhere -- will need to be convinced of the importance of compromise on the right of return. Only a serious internal Palestinian debate will reduce the gap between public and private PLO rhetoric on this pivotal question -- though the present circumstances hardly seem propitious for a dispassionate discussion of anything connected with the refugee issue.

16. (U) ConGen Jerusalem cleared this cable.

GNEHM